



Zhang, Y. (2001). System, Empire and State in Chinese International Relations. *Review of International Studies*, 27(5), 43-63.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210501008026>

Early version, also known as pre-print

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1017/S0260210501008026](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210501008026)

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Yongjin Zhang

Review of International Studies / Volume 27 / Issue 05 / December 2001, pp 43 - 63

DOI: 10.1017/S0260210501008026, Published online: 04 July 2003

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0260210501008026

How to cite this article:

Yongjin Zhang (2001). System, empire and state in Chinese international relations. Review of International Studies, 27, pp 43-63 doi:10.1017/S0260210501008026

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System, empire and state in Chinese international relations

YONGJIN ZHANG¹

Two criticisms have long been directed at the theorization of international relations (IR): ahistoricism and Eurocentrism. Westphalia, it is argued, has been so stigmatized that it has become synonymous with the beginning as well as the end of what we understand as international relations. Rationalist theorizing in general, of both the neorealist and neoliberal persuasions, has produced a set of deductive theories that aim and claim to transcend history. Neorealism of the Waltzian brand in particular is ‘cleansed’ of history.² Such concepts as state, system and sovereignty, so central to the theorizing enterprise, have rarely been historicized in their proper context.³ Although such indictment is not new and the problematic of the discipline has been long recognized, challenges have not been adequately taken up even when the end of the Cold War shattered the disciplinary complacency and exposed its inability to explain and understand, let alone to predict, the fundamental transformation in contemporary international relations. The remedies are, nevertheless, slow in coming. The English School, it is true, has managed to eschew ahistoricism through their concerted efforts to ‘invent international society’.⁴ Historical narratives of the evolution and expansion of international society by members of the English School, from Herbert Butterfield, Hedley Bull and Martin Wight to Adam Watson and Robert Jackson, constitute an indispensable part of their theorizing.⁵ It is also true that the recent intervention of historical sociology and the constructive turn in

¹ Part of this article was presented at a round-table discussion at the Department of International Relations, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University in June 2001. I would like to thank the round-table participants for their valuable comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank the editors of the *Review*, particularly Tim Dunne, for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

² Benno Teschke, ‘Geopolitical Relations in the European Middle Ages: History and Theory’, *International Organization*, 52:2 (1998), p. 328.

³ For a good summary of such criticisms, see Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History—Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See also Christian Reus-Smit, ‘The Idea of History and History with Ideas: Toward a Constructivist Historical Sociology of International Relations’, in John M. Hobson and Steve Hobden (eds.), *Bringing Historical Sociologies into International Relations* (forthcoming).

⁴ See Tim Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).

⁵ See in particular, Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966), Martin Wight, *Systems of States*, edited with an introduction by Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), Hedley Bull and Adam Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Adam Watson, *The Evolution of International Society: A Comparative Historical Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1992), and Robert H. Jackson, *The Global Covenant: Human Conduct in a World of States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

theorizing about IR have led us into deeper and broader sweeps of world history in the search for historicized conceptions of state and for the institutional rationality of international relations. Ironically, such greater historical sensitivity may have reinforced rather than mediated existing Eurocentrism. Ancient Greece—the Hellas, the Roman Empire, and medieval European history have been either rediscovered or reaffirmed as the most favoured, if not the only, pre-Westphalian ‘testing ground’ for existing IR theories. The nature of political orders beyond European history and their historical transformations still remain largely outside the empirical purview of much recent theorizing of IR.⁶

It is therefore not surprising that though fleeting and flirting references to fragments of the history of Chinese international relations, particularly the Warring States period, have often been made in theoretical works of IR, Ancient and Imperial China has not been taken very seriously.⁷ Adda Bozeman’s work published more than forty years ago still stands as a rare exception in this regard.⁸ To the extent that the system of states in Ancient China and the so-called Chinese world order have been looked at, the subjects remain the privileged preserve of Sinologists and Chinese historians.⁹ Yet, the Chinese experience is uniquely challenging, as it evolved entirely independently of European influence until modern times. Ancient China produced one of the earliest systems of states in the world, which initially paralleled and later survived the existence of the Ancient Greek city-states system. Imperial China, in addition, presided over a long-lasting social order in East Asia, an international system of a sort nestled in a distinct civilization and with its own structuring and organizing principles. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese international relations were subject to their own distinctive rules, norms, discourses and institutions. Epic transformations, too, have taken place in Chinese international relations. How the system of states emerged from the collapse of the central authority of the Zhou Dynasty in the eighth century BC and why a universal empire was reduced to a civilizational state in the twentieth century presents both challenges and implications for a historically informed IR theorization. If a truly world historical perspective is imperative in remaking the studies of international relations, as Barry Buzan and Richard Little have advocated,¹⁰ it is time to bring China in.

⁶ See for example John M. Hobson, ‘The Historical Sociology of the State and the State of Historical Sociology in International Relations’, *Review of International Political Economy*, 5:2 (1998), pp. 284–320; Stuart J. Kaufman, ‘The Fragmentation and Consolidation of International Systems’, *International Organization*, 51:2 (Spring 1997), pp. 173–208; Steve Hobden, ‘Theorising the International System: Perspectives from Historical Sociology’, *Review of International Studies*, 25:2 (1999), pp. 257–71. Teschke, ‘Geopolitical Relations’, pp. 325–58, and Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State: Culture, Social Identity, and Institutional Rationality in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999). Kaufman, though, has tentatively looked at the history of ancient Middle East as a testing case.

⁷ Watson’s *The Evolution of International Society* does contain a brief chapter on the Ancient Chinese system of states. See pp. 85–93.

⁸ Adda B. Bozeman, *Politics and Culture in International History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960). Bozeman devoted a whole chapter in this book (Chapter 4) to studying international relations in Chinese history. What also makes Bozeman’s book different is that she weaves this into a truly international history, which she views indivisible as a universally shared fund of human experience.

⁹ See for example John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), and Richard Louis Walker, *The Multi-State System of Ancient China* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Buzan and Little, 2000.

In this essay, I provide a broad analytical canvas of three historically varying forms of international order that China has experienced: the onset and endurance of a multi-state system in Ancient China, the triumph and vicissitudes of a unified and universalist empire and a world order associated with it, and its eventual encountering with the European international society and the metamorphosis of the Chinese empire into a state among states in the Westphalian order. My main purpose in providing the analytical discussions that follow is threefold. First, it is to look at how states and political entities are bound together in their interactions not just beyond the misty horizon of the European experience but also before the rise of European civilization. How earlier human enterprises (from Sumerian to Persian and from Ancient Greek to Ancient Chinese) function in organizing and regulating their mutual relations clearly forms and frames the deep historical context from which the modern international system emerges. Second, it is to subject what Northedge once called ‘ancestors of the modern system’¹¹ in Chinese history to an institutional analysis. Ideas and practices and institutional achievements and failures of the multi-state system in Ancient China and the enduring Chinese world order, I believe, still raise questions of broad intellectual concerns that continue to resonate in contemporary international relations. Finally, an equally important purpose that I hope this analytical essay will serve is to foster an appreciation from a deeper historical perspective of the discomfort and unease that China has experienced in its relations with contemporary international society.

This is an ambitious task and as a consequence my efforts are exploratory and suggestive. The main body of the first section provides a concise discussion of institutional features of the system of states in Ancient China to see how some basic ideas and institutions in the modern European international system are already working there, albeit conceptualized differently. I also investigate in this section how and why philosophical discourse during this period frames the *raison d'être* for the emerging *Pax Sinica*. The second section studies puzzles surrounding *Pax Sinica*—the Imperial Chinese world order. It explores the tribute system as a system of thought and institutions regulating Imperial China’s international relations. The puzzle of the longevity and resilience of *Pax Sinica*, which prevailed in the Chinese world for more than two millennia, opens up my discussions of institutional rationality of the Chinese world order in this section. In the third section, I offer an analytical account of how the third great transformation of Chinese international relations not only ‘squeeze[d] a civilization into the arbitrary, constraining framework of the modern state’¹² but also brings China into the emerging global international society. My reflections are offered in the conclusion.

The system of states in Ancient China: institutional features and intellectual legacies

The emergence of a multi-state system in Ancient China is commonly attributed to the decline and eventual collapse of the central public authority of the Zhou

¹¹ F. S. Northedge, *The International Political System* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), pp. 34–52.

¹² Lucian Pye, ‘China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society’, *Foreign Affairs*, 69:4 (Fall 1990), p. 58.

Dynasty. Although the systemic power configurations in the Spring and Autumn period (770 BC to 476 BC) and the Warring States period (475 BC to 221 BC) varied radically,¹³ this system of states sustained 'international' relations of Ancient China for over five centuries, only to be replaced by the establishment of the first universal Chinese empire by the Qin in 221 BC. Ancient Chinese states, then, faced the classical dilemma of any decentralized international system, that of anarchy. What were the innovative extra-territorial institutions and practices that were designed to mediate anarchy and solve the problem of co-operation and conflict? In other words, what were the basic institutional features of the Ancient Chinese states-system? I argue that elements of constitutional principles and some basic institutional practices that are said to have characterized the modern European international system were already present and functioning in the system of states in Ancient China. They were nevertheless conceptualized differently. Further, such institutional arrangements and practices were underscored and sustained by the existence of a common culture.

Common culture

A system of states, in Wight's words, 'presupposes a common culture'.¹⁴ Unlike the Greek city-states system, which grew out of barbarism, the multi-state system in Ancient China emerged in the heartland of the Chinese civilization. Moreover, in the five centuries of its existence, it never expanded beyond the Chinese cultural area.¹⁵ Cultural commonality was further underscored by a shared recent past and shared legends, which bound these states together.¹⁶ One could also talk about a common descent, as the rulers of these nascent states were all from the aristocracies of the Zhou Dynasty. That reinforced their common identity, and even common morality. *Zhou Li* (the rites of the Zhou), for example, informed extensively various institutions that played the most important role in regulating relations among Ancient Chinese states.¹⁷ Finally, the common language of the Chinese performed

¹³ The differences have been captured nicely by a Chinese historian when argued that 'Whereas wars during the Spring and Autumn period were waged mainly to contend for hegemonic leadership (Ba), wars waged during the Warring States period aimed at annexation'. Yang Kuan, *Zhan Guo Shi* (A History of the Warring States Period) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1998), p. 2.

¹⁴ Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 46.

¹⁵ The Chinese cultural area was, it should be noted, an ever-expanding one. Cultural commonality in the Ancient Chinese world refers to an existing state of affairs as much as a creative process. The sinicization of barbarians (*yi xia bian yi*) was already in dynamic full swing in the Spring and Autumn period. The states of Chu and Yue, which were regarded as 'non-Chinese', were fully assimilated through participating in the rivalry for Ba (hegemony/leadership) and in the political order. Both indeed won leadership contests at various times during the Spring and Autumn period. The state of Qin, which eventually unified China at the end of the Warring States period, was once regarded as 'semi-barbarian', as it was situated at the periphery of the Chinese cultural world.

¹⁶ All these states, estimated at between 148 and 170 at the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period, had previously been principalities of the Zhou Dynasty. They emerged as states with independent claims only when the authorities of the Zhou Court slowly but inexorably dissolved. Many of them however retained a semblance of allegiance to the Zhou Court until as late as the end of the fifth century BC.

¹⁷ Hong Junpei, *Chunqiu Guoji Gongfa* (International Law in the Spring and Autumn Period) (Taipei: Literature, History and Philosophy Publishing House, 1975), pp. 58–62.

dual functions in enhancing the cultural basis of the Ancient Chinese states-system. The common identity of the states against the non-Chinese speaking 'barbarians' was enhanced, and the bilateral and multilateral state-to-state communication and diplomacy, and mutual understanding among peoples, was facilitated.¹⁸ Such a high degree of commonality in terms of culture, history and language among members of the Ancient Chinese world went a long way towards accounting for the homogeneity of members in terms of the structure both of the state and of government that characterized the Ancient Chinese states-system.¹⁹

Extra-territorial institutions and practices

If the assumption of the existence of a states-system accepts the presence of a common culture, it must be safely assumed that a common culture among members facilitated the emergence and operation of extra-territorial institutions that operated to regulate interstate relations and sustain the system *per se*. Given frequent occurrences of wars and the intensity of conflicts, it is hard to imagine that such intensive and comprehensive intercourse—political, military, economic and cultural—among states in Ancient China was possible without some sort of *jus gentium*. What were then important extra-territorial institutions and practices that prevailed in Ancient China? In other words, what norms were endorsed, exemplified and codified, and what codes were sanctioned, honoured and observed by members of the Ancient Chinese states-system in peace as well as in war? Ample evidence suggests that as a response to challenges encountered in solving problems of co-operation, conflict, and co-existence, an elaborate culturally informed web of codes was formulated and followed by member states in their mutual relations within the Chinese system.²⁰ Among the most important are sovereignty, diplomacy, the balance of power and rituals (dealt with in turn below).

By the term external sovereignty I mean 'the exclusive capacity to conclude international treaties, declare war, and have diplomatic representation'.²¹ There was certainly no formal legal expression of external sovereignty as a constitutional principle in the Ancient Chinese states-system. However, one does not need to dig deep to locate its firm institutional ground.²² Ancient Chinese states, for example,

¹⁸ It is not uncommon, for example, for diplomats and scholarly advisers to serve several courts in their lifetime and even at the same time. Confucius was one such ineffective adviser to a number of courts other than his native one. See Joseph R. Levenson and Franz Schurmann, *China: An Interpretive History from the Beginnings to the Fall of Han* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), p. 46.

¹⁹ This is of course not to deny the existence of localism as seen in broad differences in dialect, customs, religion, legends and cults, which existed among the various regions prior to the Spring and Autumn period.

²⁰ The American sinologist William A. P. Martin is probably the first Western scholar to compare rules and norms of Ancient Chinese international relations to modern international law. At the International Conference of Orientalists in Berlin in 1881, Martin presented a paper entitled 'Traces of International Law in Ancient China'. A revised version of this paper is included in William A. P. Martin, *The Lore of Cathay* (London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1901), pp. 427–49. Martin was also responsible for translating Henry Wheaton's *Elements of International Law* into Chinese in 1864, the first of its kind, which was published by the government of the Qing Dynasty.

²¹ Teschke, 'Geopolitical Relations', p. 350.

²² This is also the case with the ancient Greek and Renaissance Italian states-systems. Christian Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, p. 6.

monopolized the right to declare war against each other. Thus in a bilateral treaty between the state of Qin and the state of Chu in 579 BC, it was stipulated that 'Chu and Chin [Qin] shall not go to war with each other'.²³ Those states also frequently changed their allies and made treaties among themselves, as discussed below. To the extent that these states were territorialized, sovereignty informs territoriality, too. It was not uncommon practice for a state to cede part of its territory either as a condition for peace, or as an exchange for a favour, or as an expression of gratitude.²⁴ States also controlled the right of passage through their territory by foreign diplomatic envoys.²⁵ More interestingly, states acknowledged mutually their right to offer political asylum, particularly to the nobility of other states. Some states also agreed on the rule related to the extradition of criminals and traitors, which were in some cases explicitly written into treaties.²⁶

A wide range of diplomatic practices was conducted among members of the Ancient Chinese states-system, ranging from frequent diplomatic messengers, regular court visits and conferences of princes as 'moments of maximum communication'.²⁷ It was customary that the rulers themselves attended and signed bilateral and multilateral treaties committing their states. It is claimed that the head of the Qi state called for and attended personally twenty-four bilateral and multilateral 'summit meetings' between 681 and 644 BC.²⁸ What is sometimes claimed to be the world's first multilateral disarmament conference was held in 546 BC.²⁹ Spies and hostages were well-established institutions in the diplomatic system, too.³⁰ Although permanent resident diplomatic missions were not maintained, frequent diplomatic contact and communication was ensured by the fact that all important occasions in the life of a ruling prince/king, including his birth, death, marriage, burial and assumption of throne, all obliged friendly states to send diplomatic envoys to deliver congratulations or convey condolences.³¹ After dispensing with proper ceremonies, these occasions became regular diplomatic channels to discuss interstate affairs. Diplomacy encompassed so wide a range of activities that a rich vocabulary had to be developed to record them and to

²³ Walker, *Multi-State System of Ancient China*, p. 83. It has also been noted that states in Ancient China agreed that a state should not be invaded in the year in which its ruler has died, or in which there has been an insurrection within the state. Hong Junpei, *International Law*, pp. 266–8. A number of culturally informed rules amounting to the laws of war were also practised. For more details, see William A. P. Martin, *The Lore of Cathay*, pp. 443–8.

²⁴ Sun Yurong, *Gudai Zhongguo Guojifa Yanjiu* (A Study of International Law in Ancient China) (Beijing: Chinese University of Politics and Law Press, 1999), pp. 80–81.

²⁵ In Walker's words, 'It was customary for envoys to obtain permission for passage through the states which lay in the path of their missions. Envoys who attempted to pass without permission were seized and some were put to death'. Walker, *Multi-State System of Ancient China*, p. 24. See also Sun Yurong, *International Law in Ancient China*, p. 86.

²⁶ Roswell Britton, 'Chinese Interstate Intercourse before 700 BC', *American Journal of International Law*, 29 (1935), pp. 630–2. See also Walker, *Multi-State System of Ancient China*, p. 90.

²⁷ Wight, *Systems of States*, p. 32.

²⁸ Walker, *Multi-State System of Ancient China*, p. 79.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 56–8. See also Hsu Chao-yun, 'The Spring and Autumn Period', in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 562.

³⁰ It was not an uncommon practice, for example, for the two states that were party to a bilateral treaty to exchange hostages as a guarantee for the enforcement of the treaty signed. On such occasions, hostages were often sons of the rulers.

³¹ Hong Junpei, *International Law*, pp. 164–212.

distinguish one from another.³² Not surprisingly, a disproportionately large body of the state administration grew and functioned to deal with external affairs. Diplomatic reciprocity and diplomatic immunity were norms recognized and granted.³³

The balance of power was the most vital institution that sustained the existence of the Ancient Chinese system of states. It is in fact difficult to contest the argument that it is the collapse of the balance of power that led to the establishment of the first Chinese empire in 221 BC by the Qin state. Two important Chinese classics, *Chunqiu* (The Annals of Spring and Autumn) and *Zuozhuan* (Zuo's Tradition) record chronologically the rise and fall of states and are rich in stories of how states played the balance of power game for survival, protection, conservation and expansion. The idea and practice of balance of power can be found in the rich vocabulary about Ba (leadership/hegemony), Meng (covenant/alliance), and Hui (convention/conference). The best part of the Warring States period saw the unravelling of the balance of power among seven contending states. To the strategy of *lianheng* (forming vertical alliances) initiated by the other six states to contain the Qin, the Qin state responded innovatively with a counter strategy of *hezong* (forming horizontal alliances), which sought to strike alliance relationships with any one or more of the other six states. Combined with its strategy of *yuanjiao jingong* (making alliance with distant states, while attacking the ones that are nearby), the Qin emerged victoriously as the unifier of China. *Hezong*, *lianheng* and *yuanjiao jingong* are now two important legacies in Chinese strategic thinking.

In a broad sense, the rules, norms and accepted behaviours and the institutional practices discussed above, with the exception of balance of power, were conceptualized in Ancient China as *li*, meaning rituals. They were thought to be morally and not legally binding codes. Conceptualized as a totality, it was arguably fundamental to the operation of the Ancient Chinese states-system. Such a different conceptualization informs us of a uniquely Chinese view of how human life, including 'international' life, should be organized. As an ancient institution, *li* predated the emergence of the Chinese states-system. It derived from the Chinese belief in a hierarchical cosmic order within which every being was assigned a proper place. Harmonious co-operation and co-existence could only be achieved by close observation of propriety. *Li* therefore governed not only the conduct of individuals, but also that of states. Serious violation or even incompetent observation of *li* in interstate relations could have put the moral authority and legitimacy of a ruler into question, and may even have brought collective condemnation of, or war against, the perpetrator state. Some twentieth century Chinese scholars argue that rules and norms embodied in *li* were comparable to international law.³⁴ In a narrower sense,

³² Walker noted this with clarity. 'The free Chinese sources record the various diplomatic activities under such terms as *Chao*, a court visit paid by one ruler to another; *hui*, meetings of officials or nobles of different states, *pin*, missions of friendly inquiries sent by the ruler of one state to another; *shi*, emissaries sent from one state to another; *shou*, hunting parties where the representatives of different states combined business with pleasure'. Walker, *Multi-State System of Ancient China*, p. 75.

³³ See Xu Chuanbao, *Xianqin Guojifa zhi Yiji* (Traces of International Law in Ancient China) (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1931), pp. 127–50 and Sun Yurong, *International Law*, pp. 93–118.

³⁴ Fung Yu-lan explicitly argued, for example, that 'These peacetime and wartime *li*, as observed by one state in its relations to another, were equivalent to what we now call international law'. Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 178.

rituals refer to ceremonies and ceremonial behaviour. Even in such a narrow conceptualization, strict observation was required. A large number of diplomatic representations were obliged and reciprocated among states simply for the purpose of observing rituals, for example, of the assumption of the throne and the death of a ruler.

Intellectual legacies

Ancient China was, however, not just a period of warring states. Like the contemporaneous ancient Greece, it was also the age of philosophers when a 'hundred schools of thought' flourished. All major Chinese philosophical traditions trace their origins to the period.³⁵ Philosophical discourses in this period were to leave two important intellectual legacies on conception, design and operation of the social order in the Chinese world. The discourse on human nature exposed conflicting views between two dominant schools of thought, Confucianism and Legalism. While Confucians, particularly Mencius, regarded human nature as fundamentally good or at least perfectible through education, Legalists held that human nature was inherently evil and aggressive, and if unrestrained, always led to conflict.³⁶ For Confucians, therefore, benevolent government or rule by virtue (*de zhi*) offered the best chance for peace and avoidance of conflict, as it brought out the best in humans. For Legalists, on the other hand, only stringent measures and harsh control in the form of an authoritarian and even totalitarian government could prevent conflict. Whereas the Legalists resorted to a rigid system of laws as governing institutions, Confucians advocated rule by moral examples. They therefore advanced contradictory propositions of the causes of war, the purpose and function of government and institutions and systems that best served to promote harmonious co-existence of social groups and political communities. They promoted different visions of the moral and social order both within and beyond the state.

The Confucian discourse also sought to perpetuate an idealization of Ancient China's unity under the Zhou Dynasty. A moral conviction that the universe is one peaceful and harmonious whole prevailed in Ancient China. It long predated Confucius and his contemporaries. It assumed a natural harmony between heavenly and earthly forces and projected an image of the entire universe as a world-embracing community. Such universalist thought was, in Bozeman's words, 'restated and amplified' by Confucians.³⁷ For Confucians, the preordained order of natural harmony in such cosmic unity could only be achieved when man's conduct correlated to it by observing strictly five important human relationships: those between husband and wife, father and son, older and younger brother, friend and friend, and sovereign and minister. All kinds of political conduct must conform to these norms, beyond family, within state and in the sphere of humanity at large.

³⁵ Levenson and Schurmann, *China: An Interpretive History*, pp. 56–61. See also Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History*.

³⁶ A number of short excerpts from classical Chinese philosophical writings on opposing views of human nature can be found in Evan Luard (ed.), *Basic Texts in International Relations: The Evolution of Ideas about International Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 5–17.

³⁷ Bozeman, *Politics and Culture*, p. 134.

The idealization of the feudal ideal of the political unity of Ancient China attributed mainly to Confucians was arguably one of the most important philosophical legacies that had a lasting impact on the Chinese view of the world. It was claimed that China, or the civilization known to Confucians, had always been ruled by a single monarch in antiquity. It fostered a longing for the golden age of antiquity when harmony and peace were said to prevail. For Confucians in the Warring States period, political unity became a perennial ideal. Mencius is reputed to have advised a prince that 'Where there is unity, there is peace'. Such a concept of political unity associated with harmony and peace has, ever since, exercised a greater hold on the Chinese imagination than the actual record of belligerency, discord and enforced unification which are characteristic of many periods of Chinese history.

Confucius and Confucians represented one school of thought in the Warring States period. They were important, not only because they turned out to be harbingers of a future age, but also because Confucian ideas, 'amorphous, adaptable and various' as they are,³⁸ were used for the design of imperial institutions and systems of government and governance, particularly in the Han Dynasty, as the Confucian-legalist amalgam (the so-called Imperial Confucianism) became the prevailing ideology in the imperial bureaucracy. The common notion of universal kingship became inextricably associated with the peculiarly Confucian mystique of rule by virtue and with 'absolutization of the Confucian moral order'.³⁹ The *raison d'être* for the emerging *Pax Sinica* after the Han Dynasty was naturally underlined by the rise of Confucianism during the Han, which ensured that the cosmic and social universe was reimagined and the universal kingship was reinvented to invest the Chinese emperor, the Son of Heaven, with mediating moral power between heaven and earth, for achieving harmony and order in social as well as cosmic space.

***Pax Sinica* and the tribute system: institutional resilience and rationality**

The transformation of the Ancient Chinese interstate system into a universal empire was accomplished when six other contending states were vanquished by the Qin one by one in quick succession in the short period between 230 and 221 BC. The establishment of the first unified empire in China was however historically contingent, particularly on the military power of the Qin state and the operation of a set of institutions introduced by Lord Shang. It was also contingent on the dominance of Legalist thought in the Qin statecraft that worshipped despotic power and rule by law and force. The Confucian discourse that promoted the myth of China's political unity in antiquity may have also helped legitimize the replacement of the anarchic system of multiple states by a universal empire.⁴⁰ Over the next two millenniums,

³⁸ Martin Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (edited by Gabriele Wight and Brian Porter), (London: Leicester University Press, 1991), p. 66.

³⁹ Benjamin Schwartz, 'Perception of World Order, Past and Present', in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, p. 278.

⁴⁰ This probably explains why Ancient Greeks 'unaccountably missed a manifest destiny' of turning the states system of Hellas into a union of federation or an empire, though the ancient Greeks, too, entertained a strong idea of great political unity. Kaufman recently argued that strong principles of city-state identity held by both the Sumerian cities and the Greek cities also acted to resist unification and withheld the legitimacy of established empires. Kaufman, 'Fragmentation and Consolidation', pp. 193–4.

Imperial China created and sustained an international system that ‘proved to be more enduring and successful than the comparable order of any other historical nation’.⁴¹ *Pax Sinica*, frequently labelled as the Chinese world order, took centuries to take its definitive shape amidst the vicissitudes of the Chinese empire. It is, however, the only ‘sub-global international system’, in Buzan and Little’s words, that survived the ancient and classical period and flourished in the better part of modern world history. It co-existed with the European society of states until the second half of the nineteenth century when it was incorporated into the Westphalian order. As such, it can be counted as one of the greatest institutional innovations and achievements of traditional China. One of the remarkable feats of *Pax Sinica*, which is also an enduring puzzle, is the longevity and flexibility of its fundamental institution, the tribute system.

The tribute system in theory and practice

The origin of the tribute system (*chao gong ti xi*) as special trading arrangements can be traced back at least to the Han Dynasty, the ‘formative years’ of such institutions in Chinese international relations.⁴² Early records of China’s tributary relations included various missions from the ancient Roman and Persian empires.⁴³ However, the tribute system that evolved throughout centuries was much more than a trading network, or even an international economic system. Already during the Han Dynasty, tributes played important political functions in keeping peace with, as well as in winning, allies against the aggressive Xiongnu, the principal threat to the Chinese empire.⁴⁴ Understandably, it was during the Tang Dynasty (618–907), after imperial unity was re-established, that the tribute system witnessed its most aggressive and rapid expansion and institutionalization. It extended to see the participation of many non-Chinese states and polities from Central, South and Southeast Asia.⁴⁵ Some Tang records claim that China had as many as seventy-two tributaries.⁴⁶

The physical expansion of the tribute system paled into insignificance when compared with the maturation of the tribute system as the institutional expression of *Pax Sinica*. The existence and expansion of the tribute system was underlined by basic assumptions of the superiority of Chinese civilization. Increasingly during the Tang Dynasty, they became mutually constitutive. While the tribute system was seen as embodying the political submission of barbarians, this perceived political sub-

⁴¹ Bozeman, *Politics and Culture*, p. 143.

⁴² He Fangchuan, *Huayi Zhixu Lun* (A Study of Pax Sinica), *Journal of Peking University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences edn.), 6 (1998), p. 32.

⁴³ Geoffrey Hudson, *Europe and China: A Survey of Their Relations from the Earliest Times to 1800* (Edward Arnold, 1961) and Yu Yingshih, *Trade and Expansion in Han China: A Study in the Structure of Sino-Barbarian Economic Relations* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

⁴⁴ Yu Yingshih, *Trade and Expansion*, pp. 48–54.

⁴⁵ He Fangchuan, *A Study of Pax Sinica*, pp. 32–35. He also noted that during the Song Dynasty, the ‘Silk Road on the sea’ brought more Southeast Asian countries into closer relations with China in the tribute system.

⁴⁶ Fang Yaguang, *Tangdai Duiwai Kaifang Chutan* (Preliminary Studies of Tang’s Opening to the Outside World) (Hefei: Huangshan Books Publisher, 1998), p. 14.

mission reinforced Imperial China's sense of superiority. Such tributary relationships that matured during the Tang thus became the only normative order that did not contradict the Chinese worldview. The central assumption of such a worldview was that China was *the* civilization. The Chinese emperor, as the Son of Heaven, had the mandate of Heaven to rule *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven). The natural extension of this logic had two important implications, at least in theory. One was that the institutional structure of the Chinese world order had to be hierarchical, with the Chinese emperor sitting at the apex of this order with a heavenly mandate. The other was that China, as the superior moral power, was responsible for maintaining and harmonizing this order with the moral examples it set, with institutional innovations and with force if necessary. The tribute system became in this light an institutional arrangement through which the moral authority of the Chinese empire could be translated into 'normative pacification' in Chinese international relations.⁴⁷

At a more practical level, the tribute system was an institutional complex to ensure co-existence among the entities of the Chinese empire: barbarian tribes, kingdoms, peripheral political communities and eventually even the European states. Over time it became the institutional solution to co-operation problems among polities interacting with Imperial China in the Chinese world. Three observations must be made with regard to such interactions. First, participants in the Chinese international system interacted with Imperial China in decisively different fashions, contingent upon their geopolitical locations, cultural and historical linkages and commercial interests. Whereas Inner and Central Asian nomadic and barbarian tribes participated in the Chinese world order mostly through war and conquest,⁴⁸ the participation of European empires and states was almost exclusively through trade until the mid-nineteenth century. Second, whereas the intensity of interactions between Imperial China and other participants varied individually and temporally, in general, those participants did not interact with each other in any meaningful manner. European states certainly did not enter into any meaningful relationship with any Inner and Central Asian barbarian tribes through their participation in the Chinese world order. Even Annam and Korea, two core members of the Chinese tribute system, did not have regular and sustained contact with each other. One possible exception was between Korea and Japan.⁴⁹ Third, it follows that the pattern of interactions in the Chinese international system was radically different from the two models that Buzan and Little have suggested. It conforms neither to the more primitive linear pattern nor to the multiordinate pattern that is largely based on the European experience.⁵⁰ The interactions within the Chinese international system are still better captured by a radiational pattern with Imperial China at the centre.

⁴⁷ The term is from Michael Mann. For more discussions on transnational moral authority in international relations, see Rodney Bruce Hall, 'Moral Authority as a Power Source', *International Organization*, 51:4 (Autumn 1997), pp. 591–622.

⁴⁸ Sechin Jagchid and Van Jay Symons, *Peace, War and Trade Along the Great Wall: Nomadic-Chinese Interaction Through Two Millennia* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), and Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Cambridge, MA: B. Blackwell, 1989).

⁴⁹ Two points must be made here. First, such relations were not regarded as interacting within the Chinese world order. Second, the Koreans viewed the interactions with China and Japan differently. In the first instance, it was *shida*, a small country serving a large one, and in the second, *jiolin*, intercourse with a neighbouring kingdom. The other interesting case was Liuqiu, which was a tributary to both China and Japan from the seventeenth century onwards.

⁵⁰ For the description and diagrams of these two patterns, see Buzan and Little, *International Systems*, pp. 96–8.

Acute contradictions have been noted between the normative claims embodied in the tribute system that perpetuated the myth of Chinese moral and cultural superiority and the actual behaviour of Chinese rulers in dealing with other members within the Chinese world order. Chinese assumptions about super- and subordination between China and all other tributary countries were not necessarily accepted by others.⁵¹ There are many examples, too, where Chinese emperors explicitly acknowledged the equality of 'barbarians' with the Chinese and even acquiesced in the Chinese inferiority.⁵² The *Heqin* (peace and friendship) policy implemented during the Han Dynasty, when it paid tribute to Xiongnu and even married one princess to pacify the barbarian Shanyu, are examples.⁵³ The Northern Song emperors were known to have concluded treaties with the Qidan ruler of the Liao (916–1125) in 1005 and 1042 respectively, accepting inferior status and agreeing to pay annual tribute. In 1142, the Southern Song did the same with the Jin (1115–1234) now replacing the Liao.⁵⁴ Even the powerful and ambitious Yongle Emperor (1402–24) of the Ming was believed to have addressed Central Asian monarchs on equal terms.⁵⁵ Conventional wisdom finds it difficult to square such tensions. 'The chief problem of China's foreign relations', Fairbank asserted more than thirty years ago, 'was how to square theory with fact, the ideological claim with actual practice'.⁵⁶

Does this disjuncture between theory and practice add weight to Krasner's argument that 'organized hypocrisy'⁵⁷ is 'the normal state of affairs'? The hypocrisy embodied in the organizing principles, norms and practices of the Chinese world order is embedded as an intended institutional feature. It may be indeed argued that it is precisely such purposive institutional ambiguities in the actual operation of the tribute system that made it a flexible system for the conduct of Imperial China's foreign relations.⁵⁸ The myth of Chinese superiority had to be maintained, however, for domestic purposes. As Joseph Fletcher concluded in his study of Sino-Central Asian tributary relations:

Within the empire, the myth of world suzerainty was a useful ideological instrument for ruling China, and as Shahrukh's ambassadors and the khojas found, it was not to be compromised. But in foreign affairs the myth often proved a hindrance. Then quietly, the emperor practised what he pleased, not what he preached. Relations on an equal basis with

⁵¹ See Lien-sheng Yang, 'Historical Notes on the Chinese World Order', and Mark Mancall, 'The Ch'ing Tributary System: An Interpretive Essay', both in John K. Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 20–33, and pp. 63–89.

⁵² See for example, Morris Rossabi (ed.), *China Among Equals: The Middle Kingdom and Its Neighbors, 10th–14th Centuries* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983).

⁵³ Yu Ying-shih, *Trade and Expansion*, p. 41. See also Li Dingyi, *Zhonghua Shigang* (A Brief History of China) (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1997), pp. 103–4.

⁵⁴ John K. Fairbank *China: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 114.

⁵⁵ Joseph F. Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia, 1368–1884', in Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 209–216.

⁵⁶ John K. Fairbank, 'A Preliminary Framework', in Fairbank (ed.), *The Chinese World Order*, pp. 2–3.

⁵⁷ This is borrowed from Krasner. In Krasner's conceptualization, the discrepancy between the professed ideals embodied in the notion of sovereignty and the actual behaviour of its adherents is considered organized hypocrisy. Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁸ For more arguments about for the flexibility of China's tributary system, see Mark Mancall, 'The Ch'ing Tribute System'.

Herat, Lhasa, Kokand, or Moscow were not exceptions to Chinese practices at all. They were customary dealings on the unseen side of a long-established tradition.⁵⁹

The Chinese, barbarians and the world

The formation, evolution and operation of the tribute system, and by the same token its ambiguities and resilience, were underlined by a perennial discourse on the distinction and relationship between the Chinese and barbarians. The discourse was about cultural unity of the Chinese world as much as about how civilization and barbarism define each other. 'China is the centre and is meant to exercise control over barbarians, whereas barbarians are outsiders who should submit themselves to China'.⁶⁰ Such was the moral conviction and cultural assumption in the discourse. The Chinese assumption of cultural superiority was further reinforced by its contact with barbarians along its borders. A rigid dichotomy became embedded in Imperial China's conceptualization of its relationship with other peoples and political entities. A relationship of superordination and subordination so conceived as a system of co-existence between the Chinese and barbarians also complied with the Confucian assumptions about cosmic harmony.

Yet, Chinese is more a culturally than racially defined concept. As discussed above, to sinicize the barbarians (*yi xia bian yi*) was one main thrust of imperial expansion. Non-Chinese ethnic groups could become Chinese and be brought into the embrace of the Empire when they had accepted Chinese customs, Confucian ideology and when they performed proper rituals. As noted by Fairbank, the idea of *laihua* (come and be transformed) implied an acculturation process and reflected the Chinese conviction that barbarians could be transformed, that is, sinicized, by simple exposure to Confucianism and to the Chinese culture.⁶¹ Distinctions were thus maintained between inner barbarians (more sinicized) and outer barbarians (less sinicized). All 'uncivilized barbarians' could become 'civilized' barbarians'.⁶² There was, therefore, only a thin line between the Chinese and barbarians. Equally, there was the barbarism of the Chinese to consider, though the Chinese were mostly silent about it. Such dialectic interpretation of Chinese *vis-à-vis* barbarians leaves a large room for manoeuvring but also creates a great ambiguity. As a tenth century Chinese philosopher, Han Yu, noted, 'when Confucius composed the Spring and Autumn [Annals], if the leaders of the land adopted alien modes of behaviour he treated them as aliens; but once they had advanced into the countries of the centre, he treated them as he did the inhabitants of the centre'.⁶³ In the twentieth century, such ambiguity and ambivalence continued to be used to circumvent an acute problem presented to Chinese political theory by Imperial China's conquest and prolonged rule by cultural aliens. In a discourse with Derk Bodde about foreign domination of the Chinese empire, Fung Yu-lan argued that when the Mongols and

⁵⁹ Fletcher, 'China and Central Asia', p. 224.

⁶⁰ He Fangchuan, *A Study of Pax Sinica*, p. 37.

⁶¹ Fairbank, 'A Preliminary Framework', pp. 8–9.

⁶² Lien-sheng Yang, 'Historical Notes', p. 21.

⁶³ Michael Loewe, 'The Heritage Left to the Empires', in Michael Loewe and Edward L. Shaughnessy (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, p. 993.

Manchus conquered China, 'they had already to a considerable extent adopted the culture of the Chinese. They dominated the Chinese politically, but the Chinese dominated them culturally. They therefore did not create a marked break or change in the continuity and unity of Chinese culture and civilization'.⁶⁴

Towards an institutional rationality

Some fundamental questions remain. Why should the Chinese international order have been organized differently, for example, from both the ancient Greek city-states system and the modern international society that developed in northern Europe from around 1500? What made it so different? Why did rival institutional alternatives fail to replace it even when foreign domination of Imperial China prevailed as during the Yuan Dynasty with *Pax Tartarica* and the Qing Dynasty with the Manchu rule? Why did the tribute system persist and even expand when the Chinese empire was extremely weak (during the Song Dynasty, for example)? In the final analysis, what accounted for the institutional rationality of the tribute system?

Unravelling these puzzles entails an investigation into what Reus-Smit calls the 'deep constitutional structure' of *Pax Sinica*. Constitutional structures of any international society, in Reus-Smit's conceptualization, are complexes of metavalues that 'define the social identity of the state, and the broad parameters of legitimate state action'.⁶⁵ Three components of these complexes of metavalues are hegemonic beliefs in the moral purpose of the state, the organizing principle of sovereignty, and norms of pure procedural justice. Most importantly, constitutional structures are historically contingent as they are informed by their own historical and cultural contexts. Reus-Smit further contends that it is the variation in the ideas about the moral purpose of the state that explains the divergent institutional designs and practices of historical societies of states.⁶⁶ If we follow this argument to its logical conclusion, the endurance of a particular world order can therefore be attributed to the persistence of a dominant idea about the moral purpose of the state.

How much can this insight help? Adopting Reus-Smit's analytical template in explaining institutional variations of historical societies of states takes us a step further. In Chinese international society, the hegemonic belief in the moral purpose of the state, and indeed of all political and social communities from family, tribe to empire, is embodied in Confucianism. It is to promote social and cosmic order and harmony.⁶⁷ This provides the 'justificatory foundations' for the constitutive principle of the Chinese world order and informs systemic norms of procedural justice. As the Confucian conception of the world is civilizational, the organizing principle of

⁶⁴ Fung, 'A Short History', p. 188.

⁶⁵ Reus-Smit, *Moral Purpose of the State*, p. 39.

⁶⁶ This is understandably a rather crude summary of Reus-Smit's central arguments about the constitutional structures of international society. For more details, see Reus-Smit, *Moral Purpose of the State*, pp. 26–39.

⁶⁷ 'The orthodox line of Confucianism', Schwartz observed, 'considered the main purpose of the state to be the support and maintenance of the moral, social, and cultural order of social peace and harmony'. Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), p. 10.

sovereignty⁶⁸ is concentrically hierarchical, with China sitting at the core and others assigned a place according to how ‘civilized’ they are. An elaborate set of rituals (*li*) are designed and evolved as an ancient standard of ‘civilization’, which define the norms of procedural justice and the observance of which decides the places of others in the hierarchy of the Chinese world order. It also enables others to participate in this order. Seen in such a light, the tribute system is the fundamental institution that embodies both philosophical assumptions and institutional practices within the Chinese world order and that structures relations and ensures co-operation between China and other participants in *Pax Sinica*. It is also through the tribute system that peacetime diplomacy is carried out. For the purpose of comparison, the following table is illustrative.⁶⁹

An analysis of institutional rationality provides suggestive answers to the questions of the distinctiveness as well as the longevity of the Chinese world order. So long as the hegemonic belief in the moral purpose of the state and more broadly, of the political community incarnated in Confucianism, prevails, the tribute system as a basic institutional practices in the Chinese world order is likely to stay. At the same time, it suggests an alternative and tentative solution to two important puzzles at which historians have long marvelled. First, the Chinese world order prevails in

Table 1. *Constitutional structures and fundamental institutions of international societies: a comparison.*

Societies of states	Ancient Greece	Imperial China ⁷⁰	Modern society of states
Constitutional structures			
1. Moral purpose of state	Cultivation of <i>bios politikos</i>	Promoting cosmic and social harmony	Augmentation of individuals’ purposes and potentialities
2. Organizing principle of sovereignty	Democratic sovereignty	Sovereign hierarchy (civilizational)	Liberal sovereignty
3. Systemic norm of procedural justice	Discursive justice	Ritual justice	Legislative justice
Fundamental institutions	Interstate arbitration	Tribute system	Contractual international law multilateralism

⁶⁸ For want of a better word, I use it here guardedly and with reservation.

⁶⁹ This table is adapted from Reus-Smit, *The Moral Purpose of the State*, p. 7.

⁷⁰ I use this here to refer mostly to what can be regarded as the inner circle of the Chinese world order.

times of Imperial China's military weakness precisely because military strength on its own is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the maintenance of this order. Second, as long as non-Chinese ruling elites accept, as the Chinese do, those assumptions underlining the prevailing belief in the moral purpose of the state, no alternative institutional designs seem to serve the purpose better. These tentative answers raise an important question. Is the clash between the European international society and the Chinese world order in the second half of the nineteenth century attributable primarily to the conflict between the two different conceptions of the moral purpose of the state?

China as a state among states: the Imperial collapse and intellectual contest

Even when we could not provide definitive answers to the question raised above, it is indisputable that the collapse of the Chinese world order in the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by the demise of the Chinese belief in the moral purpose of the state. More fundamentally, Imperial China, as an empire and a civilization, was to be transformed into a nation-state within a short span of seventy years after the first violent arrival of the European international society in East Asia as seen in the armed conflicts during the Opium War (1839–42). In that time, Chinese images of the world and of international order were shaken distressingly in the first instance before being rejected forever. While political economy may explain the cyclic dynastic rise and fall in Chinese history, it was the encountering of the two international orders, European and Chinese, that is mostly responsible for the imperial collapse that brought to an end the history of all dynastic cycles in China. The third great transformation in Chinese international relations not only brought China into the emerging global international society, but also made expanding European international society global.

The arrival of the European international society

The first extensive and substantive intellectual and cultural contact between China and Europe was initiated by Jesuit missionaries towards the end of the sixteenth century. As is well known, the Jesuits diffused the European ideas of science in China, including elements of mathematics, astronomy, geography and medicine, thus making the Chinese aware of the existence of an admirable, though not necessarily equal, civilization other than the Chinese. They also introduced the Chinese civilization to Europe. Matteo Ricci, for example, was believed to be the first to present a map of the world to the Chinese Emperor in 1601. The Jesuits also helped draft in Latin Imperial China's peace treaty with Russia in 1689—the Treaty of Nerchinsk, thus involving themselves in China's diplomacy with a European power.⁷¹ This process differed from the encounter with European international society two hundred years later in several important aspects. First and foremost, the agents were

⁷¹ Hudson, *Europe and China*, pp. 291–329.

missionaries of a religious faith, not diplomats or soldiers acting on behalf of a state. There was neither political power nor economic force behind them. Second, it followed that cultural exchange and the spread of religious beliefs were sought in this contact, not political gains nor economic benefits. Third, by the same token, this contact did not challenge or threaten either the dominant view of the world held by the Confucians or the existing political and moral order prevailing in Imperial China.⁷² It is also worth remembering that this had happened before the onset of the Westphalian order and the formation of a European society of states in the mid-seventeenth century. Many ideas associated with modern international society, such as independent states, equal sovereignty, and exclusive territoriality, were still to be firmly embedded in the practice of European international relations. Moreover, confidence in the superiority of the European civilization was yet to be established.

The first arrival of European international society to China predated the Opium War (1839–42)—the date that is conventionally regarded as the arrival of Western powers—by almost fifty years. In 1793, the first British diplomatic mission to China led by Lord Macartney secured an audience with Emperor Qianlong on 14 September. This unprecedented initiative failed, apparently because Macartney had refused to kowtow to Emperor Qianlong. Behind Macartney's refusal, however, lay a fundamental constitutive principle of European international society: sovereign equality.⁷³ Underlining King George III's request presented to Qianlong by Lord Macartney were a number of assumed norms in European diplomatic practices, such as resident diplomacy and reciprocity.⁷⁴ Macartney's refusal and King George III's request therefore amounted to an initial European assault on the fundamental institutions of the Chinese world order. As Macartney observed at the conclusion of his ill-fated mission, 'Nothing is more fallacious than to judge of China by any European standard'.⁷⁵ Small wonder that the second British embassy led by Lord Amherst in 1816 was rejected for similar reasons. Where diplomats failed, soldiers soon took over. The year 1840 then marked the violent arrival of the European society of states followed by a series of bloody encounters.

The European expansion into China, however, introduced not a set of norms and principles prevailing in the European society of states but instituted a roll of different rules and institutions designed in particular to govern relations between China and Europe and more broadly, the West. These rules, institutions and practices were embodied in the so-called treaty system. As Watson noted, 'the rules and institutions which the Europeans spread out to Persia and China in the nineteenth century were those which they had evolved with the Ottomans (for example, capitulations, consulates with jurisdiction over their nationals) rather than those in use within Europe itself (for example, free movement and residence virtually

⁷² The persecutions of Christianity during the seventeenth and eighteenth century owes much to the official intolerance for domestic political reasons rather than outright challenge posed by Christianity to the Confucian ethics and social order.

⁷³ In one conversation with Chinese mandarins prior to his audience with Emperor Qianlong, Macartney claimed that King George III was the 'greatest sovereign of the West' and Qianlong, 'the greatest sovereign of the East'. Alain Peyrefitte, *The Collision of Two Civilizations: The British Expedition to China in 1792–1794*, trans. Jon Rothschild (London: Harvill, 1993), p. 211.

⁷⁴ For a brief version of King George III's letter to Qianlong, see *ibid.*, pp. 195–7.

⁷⁵ J. L. Cranmer-Byng (ed.), *An Embassy to China: Lord Macartney's Journal* (London: Longman, 1962), p. 219.

without passports)'.⁷⁶ The treaty system in China, which was not totally abolished until 1943, became both the inspiration and the target of Chinese nationalism at the turn of the century. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as imperial institutions were crumbling one after another, the accommodation of Imperial China into the emerging global international society, like many other non-European countries, was subjected to China fulfilling the standard of (European) 'civilization', which by then had become part of customary international law.⁷⁷

The imperial collapse

The imperial collapse here refers not to the disintegration of the Qing Dynasty brought about by fatal imperial decay and violent internal convulsion, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. It refers to two processes that deprived the Chinese world order of its rationale and institutional foundation. From this perspective, it is no coincidence that it is exactly during what Hobsbawm identified as the age of empire (1875–1914) that the Imperial Chinese world order collapsed under the assaults of the European society of states.⁷⁸ Analytically, the collapse of this universal empire underwent two processes. One was China's loss of tributary states along the periphery of the Empire. The expansion of Europe in the form of British, French and Russian imperialism, and later the Japanese imperial expansion, reached the peripheral areas of the Middle Kingdom from the 1870s onwards. Of all the tributary states listed in the 1818 edition of the *Collected Statutes of the Qing Dynasty*,⁷⁹ Liuqiu was annexed by Japan in the 1870s; Britain took Burma after the third Anglo-Burmese War in 1885 and made it a province of British India in 1886; France colonized Annam twenty-five years after its first invasion in 1858; Laos became first a province of Siam and, in 1893, a French protectorate; and Korea was lost to Japan in 1895 after the Sino-Japanese War.⁸⁰ This painful process totally destroyed any *raison d'être* for the tribute system.

It was nevertheless the second process, that is, the crumbling of the entire pack of imperial institutions and the final collapse of the imperial polity *per se*, that rendered the Imperial collapse irrevocable. It was more than symbolically important that in 1861, Emperor Xianfeng grudgingly conceded that Imperial China had to deal with Europe on the basis of sovereign equality⁸¹ and that in 1873, kowtow was officially abolished in Sino-foreign relations. Acknowledging sovereignty and equality as the most fundamental principle in China's international relations amounted to admitting the irrelevance of basic assumptions of the Sino-centric view of the world. The establishment of the *Zongli Yamen* in 1861 as Imperial China's first prototype Foreign

⁷⁶ Adam Watson, 'Hedley Bull, States Systems and International Society', *Review of International Studies*, 13:2 (1987), p. 151.

⁷⁷ Gerrit Gong, *The Standard of 'Civilization' in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

⁷⁸ E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

⁷⁹ Fairbank, 'A Preliminary Framework', p. 11.

⁸⁰ Only Siam escaped the European imperialist colonization of Southeast Asia, becoming a buffer zone between the British and French colonies in the area.

⁸¹ In an edict sanctioning the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin, the Emperor reluctantly decreed, 'England is an independent sovereign state, let it have equal status [with China]'. Yongjin Zhang, *China in the International System, 1918–1920: The Middle Kingdom at the Periphery* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 17.

Office was the first important institutional change of China's conduct of international affairs. It was followed by China's hesitant adoption of a host of basic European institutions and practices in international relations from resident diplomacy to international law.⁸² In the end, however, nothing short of a total transformation of the imperial polity would do. The Imperial Qing government's attempts at constitutional monarchy after the Boxers fiasco were no other than an acquiescence in the total collapse of the universal kingship. The abolition of the Imperial examination system in 1905 removed, once and for all, Confucianism as the moral and intellectual foundation for the imperial order.⁸³ In this sense, the reform in the final decade of the Qing Dynasty constituted an integral part of the Imperial retreat. The Republican revolution became but a logical conclusion of such a collapse.

These dual processes of Imperial collapse marked the agonizing transition of China from a universal empire to a 'civilized' state. They were also processes through which Imperial China was gradually and forcibly accommodated into the emerging global international society. At the root of the fierce contest between Imperial China and the European society of states was mutual rejection of each other's institutional arrangements and underlying assumptions about how a world order should be organized. In this violent contest, the metavalues complex that informed the constitutional structure of the Chinese world order disintegrated. Imperial China was thus confronted by a dual challenge at the turn of the twentieth century. One was how to build down the empire into a state. And the other was how to build up China (from its largely local and provincial basis) into a nation and a state as conceptualized by the invading Europeans so as to prevent China from becoming 'a mere geographic expression' (Metternich).⁸⁴

Intellectual contest

The arrival of the European international society, with its ideas about the 'international' and what world politics was all about, induced a greater intellectual challenge than the eventual collapse of the Chinese world order. For those professed Confucian cosmopolitans who were living in the nineteenth century, their one-time 'universal empire' suddenly became provincial. The cherished principles, ideas, norms and institutions that had hitherto organized their world were promptly rendered irrelevant. When *Tianxia* (all-under-heaven) shrank to *guojia* (state), *the* Chinese world became *a* China in *the* world. Confucian cosmopolitans, erstwhile institutional innovators and designers, had to accept alien institutions as indispensably instrumental in China's handling of its relationship with the wider world. Confucian China, however, did not concede without putting up an obstinate intellectual contest. Such a contest constituted an integral process through which the Chinese came to terms with radical changes in their world.

⁸² Immanuel Hsu, *China's Entrance into the Family of Nations—The Diplomatic Phase, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), and Gerrit Gong, 'China's Entry into International Society', in Bull and Watson (eds.), *The Expansion of International Society*, pp. 171–84.

⁸³ Yongjin Zhang, 'China's Entry into International Society: Beyond the Standard of "Civilization"', *Review of International Studies*, 17:1 (1991), pp. 3–17.

⁸⁴ Quoted in Jerome Ch'en, *China and the West: Society and Culture, 1815–1937* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), p. 42.

For orthodox Confucianists, the problems of the day and particularities of China's social and political situation in the second half of the nineteenth century could only be understood in terms of the past. The European expansion was therefore identified with traditional 'barbarian' invasions in earlier times. The new world that China experienced was in this sense comparable to the Warring States period in Chinese history. It was only natural that 'China's response to the West' was initially sought through the reinterpretation of the Chinese heritage and timeless wisdom, rather than through denial and rejection. The grudging and limited endorsement of European institutions mentioned above in dealing with China's foreign relations during the Tongzhi Restoration period (1862–74) did not reflect deep normative changes so much as the application of 'practical statesmanship' within the limits of Confucian assumptions about eternal normative values and immutable principles of statecraft.⁸⁵

Such an intellectual contest shifted ground radically when China's plight was turned into an acute crisis by Imperial China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95. The question now was not whether European institutions were alien or even possibly adaptable to the Chinese tradition, but whether eternal Confucian values and institutions had become obstacles to the preservation of China as a state in the face of relentless Western intrusion. Almost overnight, Confucianism lost its initiative and force. Confucianism, in order to be retained, had now to be reinterpreted in terms of the Western tradition.⁸⁶ Crudely but subtly, the crisis turned two previously compatible goals into an antithetical choice: the survival of China as a state *vis-à-vis* the preservation of Confucian values and institutions. Loyalty to China as a state and a nation took priority over the commitment to traditional Confucian ethics and values: this led to the alienation of Chinese elites from authentic Chinese traditions and contributed to the awakening of Chinese nationalism. From Yan Fu's attempts to transvaluate traditional values by introducing Herbert Spencer and social Darwinism⁸⁷ to Liang Qichao's cry for the birth of a 'new people' as an earlier effort to construct an 'imagined community' of the Chinese nation, one can see that the contest between China and the West created what Bozeman calls 'a state of sociological neurosis' in Chinese society.⁸⁸ Political nationalism and cultural iconoclasm associated symbolically with the May Fourth movement was no more than a radical continuation of such an intellectual contest. The introduction of Marxism and the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 should be seen as a revolt against the West, not only in terms of confronting its political and military dominance but also in terms of challenging its intellectual and cultural domination.

⁸⁵ Teng, Ssu-yu and John K. Fairbank (eds.), *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey, 1839–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954).

⁸⁶ Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), vol. 1, p. ix. Levenson made a revealing comparison between two encounters of Confucianism and Western thought. In his words, 'In the first case, the Chinese tradition was standing firm, and Western intruders sought admission by cloaking themselves in the trappings of that tradition; in the second case, the Chinese tradition was disintegrating, and its heirs, to save the fragments, had to interpret them in the spirit of the Western intrusion'.

⁸⁷ See Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power*.

⁸⁸ Bozeman, *Politics and Culture*, p. 8.

Conclusion

In the twentieth century, war, revolution and reform are social processes that have ravaged as well as rescued China, as its social and political order has been reshaped and reconstructed time and again. In the same period, China's socialization within the Westphalian order has been anything but easy. Symbolically, the century opened with the Boxer Rebellion and the subsequent Allied military intervention. It closed with China being a permanent member of the UN Security Council and becoming a member of the World Trade Organization. Yet, even at the dawn of the new millennium, China's full membership in the global international society continues to be contested, as many question China's sincerity and willingness to accept the responsibilities that are associated with Great Power status. As a rising power, China, for its own part, has fiercely contested the normative changes in post-Cold War international society that have seen human rights and democratization become part of the daily round of political practice. As the world seems to be moving beyond Westphalia, China stands as a staunch defender of the Westphalian order.

Why then does the accommodation of China into the evolving global international society prove to be such an difficult task? What answers are suggested by this investigation into the *longue durée* of Chinese history? Lucian Pye recently remarked that '[T]he starting point for understanding the problem is to recognize that China is not just another nation-state in the family of nations. China is a civilization pretending to be a state'.⁸⁹ This proposition suggests an alternative way to appreciate the difficulties in understanding contemporary China in global international society. From the long historical perspective provided in this essay, China is still in the throes of the third great transformation of its international relations. Further, for the Chinese, this transformation differs from the previous two in that conflicts and contestations now are inter-civilizational, rather than intra-civilizational. The 'clash' of civilizations which Samuel Huntington famously celebrated, is not just a scenario for the future of international relations but should also be seen as an intimate part of its history.

The institutional analysis of the first two historically varying forms of international order in Chinese history poses important questions about the relationship between the past and the present. It illuminates the diversity and richness of international life in world history, in terms of institutional arrangements, traditional conceptualizations of order, and political thought and behaviour. Such diversity and richness is unfortunately what is sorely missing in IR theorizing. No credible IR theory, however, can be built only upon the narrow confines of the European historical experience. The empirical universe that IR theory needs to address must expand decisively into the non-European world and beyond Westphalia. China's rich and deep history is an important avenue for exploring other world orders. In the analysis above, I have provided a starting point for thinking about how China conceptualized relations among political communities, designed appropriate institutions to resolve problems of conflict and co-existence, and operated successfully in an international system of its own making over millennia.

⁸⁹ Lucian Pye, 'China: Erratic State, Frustrated Society', p. 58.